Ireland's complex relationship with shame

Updated / Thursday, 14 Jan 2021 16:04

An Taoiseach Micheál Martin giving a State Apology in the Dáil after the findings laid out in the report of the Commission of Investigation into Mother and Baby Homes

By Vittorio Bufacchi
UCC

More from UCC

University College Cork, Ireland
Coláiste na hOllscoile Corcaigh

Opinion: After the report into the Mother and Baby Homes, we need to rethink shame and especially its relation to violence

Shame was a recurring theme in the State apology to the survivors of mother and baby homes delivered by Taoiseach Micheál Martin in the Dáil this week. Shame was also a recurring word in the way the report of the Commission of Investigation into Mother and Baby Homes has been received. The front page

of the *Irish Independent* has the title "A Nation's Shame", and the editorial inside this paper refers to "The shame of the tears that were never shed". In the *Irish Examiner,* Michael Clifford argues that "Real shame lies with Church, State and society", and the editorial in the *Irish Times* speaks of "A culture of silence and shame".

Shame seems to be everywhere. But shame is also a complex and often misunderstood emotion, which moral philosophers have been debating for centuries. To understand the true horror of the report of the Commission of Investigation into Mother and Baby Homes, investigating the idea of shame is a good starting point.

From RTÉ Radio One's Liveline, listeners react to the publication of the Mother and Baby Homes' report and the Taoiseach's apology

Philosophical analyses of shame go back to Aristotle, who in the *Nicomachean Ethics* argues that shame is the "fear of disrepute". Aristotle's views on shame have been interpreted over the centuries in terms of a failure to live up to our values or ideals. According to many moral philosophers, shame is the loss of self-esteem we experience when our actions betray the absence of virtues or excellences in our traits. In other words, shame is what we feel when we fall short of our own or other people's expectations, when we feel responsible for being morally inadequate.

This idea of shame, although prevalent, fails to capture the complexity of

shame. In fact, it fails to explain some of the most frequent and persistent feelings of shame. Consider nudity for example. People feel shame if seen naked, by others or even by themselves in front of a mirror, and yet this is not only about our bodies not living up to the ideals of aesthetic beauty. Similarly, people with a disability or a disfigurement often talk about a sense of shame, even though they are not responsible for their circumstances.

People feel shame for being too tall or too short, too fat or too skinny. People living in poverty feel shame, although the vast majority of them were born in poverty and did not bring poverty upon themselves. Similarly, rape survivors talk about shame, and even cancer survivors report feelings of shame. People feel shame for many things they have no control over, and for which they have no responsibility.

From RTÉ One's Nine News, a 'shameful chapter': reaction on the publication of the report into mother an baby homes

That’s why we need to rethink shame. Perhaps shame is not, or not exclusively, about moral failure, or not living up to our moral expectations. Instead shame is a discombobulation at the level of identity. Shame is the feeling of not being comfortable in our skins, not being able to feel like ourselves. Shame is a manifestation of existential dissonance.

Auschwitz survivor Primo Levi wrote about shame as a kind of suffering felt by

the released prisoners "because of a reacquired consciousness of having been diminished". Levi goes as far as to equate life of prisoners in concentration camps to animal level, filled with hunger, fear, and fatigue without any space for reflection or reasoning. Perhaps the report of the Commission of Investigation into Mother and Baby Homes should be read in conjunction to Levi's work.

But there is more. Shame is not just a psychological epiphenomenon experienced at a very personal level, but also an instrument of violence. A great deal of research has gone onto shame as a trigger or cause of violent behaviour, but comparatively very little has been done on shame as an instrument of violence.

> *Rethinking shame as an act of violence, and not just a psychological state of mind, is crucial if we are to understand the report for what it is or what it should be*

In *A Theory of Justice*, moral philosopher John Rawls writes that we may characterize shame as the feeling that someone has when they experience an "injury" to their self-respect or "suffers a blow" to their self-esteem. The language he uses clearly suggests violence is occurring. This is significant.

In terms of the report of the Commission of Investigation into Mother and Baby Homes, we need to rethink shame, and especially its relation to violence. Violence is about inflicting both physical injury and psychological harm. In fact, psychological violence is often worse than physical violence, since the mind takes longer to heal than the body. After the bruises are gone, the psychological damage remains, as survivors of sexual violence will attest.

READ: How stigma and shame are deployed for political ends

Over a period of many decades in Ireland, shame was used by nuns and others working in or for mother and baby homes to do violence and inflict pain on the victims of rape and abuse. Shame was used by Church authorities, and the State, to punish women. Rethinking shame as an act of violence, and not

just a psychological state of mind, is crucial if we are to understand the report of the Commission of Investigation into Mother and Baby Homes for what it is, or what it should be: a catalogue of human rights abuses, for which people and institutions are still culpable.

The views expressed here are those of the author and do not represent or reflect the views of RTÉ

More stories on

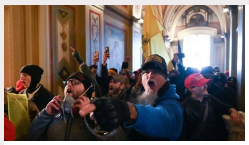
Brainstorm | Ireland | Politics | Society | UCC | Irish Research Council | Philosophy | Mother and Baby Homes Commission of Investigation

More by
Vittorio Bufacchi

UCC

How I became disillusioned with the UK and fell for Ireland

Ireland



How the US Capitol riots put democracy under attack

United States

'The end of Trump? It's only the beginning'

Donald Trump

Ethics and the virus: 'nothing spoils mighty craic like ethics'

Ethics